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QUEST FOR A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY:  
"A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO A RESIDENTIAL PARISH MINISTRY

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
the School of Theology

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Religion

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by  
Jon Arthur Lacey  
June 1971

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Dynamic forces at work in contemporary culture and American life are having a profound effect upon the life and structure of residential parish ministry. Separation. Mobility. Technology. All have been factors leading to the crisis of relevance for the residential parish, where congregations have been formed for some centuries. These and other dynamic forces are raising the question, in acute form, as to what new concepts of the mission of the congregation and what new forms of the mission of the parish are now needed to witness to the human community.

### THE PROBLEM

The changing patterns of community have left the traditional suburban parishes with little, if any, dynamics for creating community. The rapid mobility of great segments of suburban populations has made it difficult, if not impossible, to rely upon the patterns of community and structure developed as models for an agrarian-based culture. At its extreme:

The church, in the place where they sleep, where presumably they would worship, bears no relation to their work. They have contributed nothing to the life of the place except pay local taxes. They have not rubbed shoulders with the same people in the pew as they do at the work bench, or if they do, it is only socially or casually.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. N. Y. Vaughan, *Structures for Renewal* (London: Mowbray, 1967), pp. 41ff.

Abandonment of the residential parish has been the cry and admonishment of many; seminaries have been filled with students whose last choice is the parish, who have seemingly given up on the capacity of Christ's gospel to penetrate the walls--and they're there--of suburban American churches.

What else should we expect? "When there is a rapid development of urban and industrial society with its mobility of population and diversity of life, pastors serving within the existing parochial system find it increasingly difficult to minister effectively to the real communities in which men live and make their crucial decisions."<sup>2</sup>

#### Statement

Clearly, a crisis of relevance faces the congregation in the suburb. Is it to hold out, the sole defender of an ideal that has outlived its era? If so it will move to the fringes of society, as it has moved to the fringes of the expanding city, and will have less to say about the forces and processes of life as it is experienced in day to day existence--in an age when more not less involvement is mandated by the Gospel.

#### Analysis

Obviously, many of the congregational structures have opted

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<sup>2</sup>"The Redemptive Ministry of Christ and the Ministry of His Church," in World Conference on Faith and Order. Fourth Conference, Montreal, 1963, pp. 67-68.

for this island concept. The observant Christian has but to look in his neighborhood to find bastions of early twentieth century church-life remaining. But equally obvious are the many and varied attempts of "experimental ministries" to move beyond the debilitations of ties to outmoded patterns and structures of Christian community. Unfortunately many of these experiments have opted for some new personal life-style for the "minister," abandoning any realistic hope for creative corporate community for the remaining suburban congregation.

Patterns of church life and mission *are* in change. Society is changing and a church in touch with its cultural context is bound to change. So the key question is not: Is the church changing? Nor is it: Is the church changing fast enough to keep up (with the present) or changing too fast to maintain its roots (i.e., tradition)? The key question for changing styles of Christian community building is whether it (the church) is changing in response to its desire to serve Christ's mission in a relevant way in a post-modern society or simply in reaction to the changes in society. Whether new structures for congregational life are adaptive to society or contradictory to it, the key question is: Are these structures carefully thought out, worked out, experimented with, and planned, or are they simply a matter of default? Theologically speaking, are they formed, determined by our word about God and our Word to man? Is the church--in this instance a particular congregation--altering its mission and structure in a relevant way in contemporary society in light of its own self-understanding of a theology of Christian community, or is



its altered life-style and structure a reaction to other than its reason for being? These questions help frame the content of this dissertation.

Related to these questions is another: Dare we say today that a Christian doctrine of community has become the main focus of practical theological thought, and that it is of decisive relevance for the Christian approach to society? If we are prepared to say that, then we are assuming a representational responsibility to bear the likeness of Christ (in terms of ourselves reconstructed in his example) to the community of men across the bridge of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:16ff.).

The church must face squarely this problem of change. Its motivation must be examined and re-examined to get to the seed that sprouts its innovations. To be sure, the residential congregation has been face to face with mobility, technology and the separation of the spheres of life, but its attempts have not provided any lasting answers. This may be due to a reticence to confront completely the problems or an unwillingness to make the necessary changes in approach and program. Or it may be due to the lack of theological roots for the changes; change for its own sake, or for immediate results, not nourished in a soil rich in an understanding of the nature of Christian community. The issue of a relevant "body" to a Christian understanding of community still eludes most residential parishes.

#### Delimitations

This study is an investigation of a concrete expression of

altered congregational structure and life-style. The congregation under study is the Temple City Christian Church; it is a congregation related to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The examination provides both a model rooted in the life of a model congregation and a critique of its structures and purposes in light of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and William Stringfellow on the theology and doctrine of a *Christian community*. The scope of the critique includes the better known works of Stringfellow and focuses only upon Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*.

Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow are of particular importance to the study of Christian community and the church, for their understanding is deeply rooted in the church's loyalty to the image of God given to man in Jesus Christ.

The particular focus of the study is upon the *adequacy* of the model as a representative structure responding to an understanding of *Christian community*, rather than as a program implementation reacting purely to cultural stimuli for change. Effort is made to revise the model in light of what is learned from Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow on (1) the nature of Christian community, and (2) the role of professional leadership in the building of Christian community.

Temple City, California, is a community which experiences the forces of mobility, technology and alienation in the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Once a "garden area," it is now caught in the throes of urbanization. It is a typical "bedroom community" of the greater Los Angeles basin, complete with the traditional representative

denominations at its core, trying to present a viable Gospel and an alternative life-style. The period under investigation is from June, 1966, to August, 1968; the period during which the investigator served the congregation as Assistant Pastor. During this span of time the pastor was Dr. Dennis Savage, the professional minister in large part responsible for the parish structure and community building of the model.

## DESIGN

### Definitions

A *Christian community*, referred to in the study many times as a *loving community*, witnesses more through a theologically alive (and informed) concept of Christian community than through any particular structure. It is the contention of this study that the fullest potential of the residential parish is to be discovered in a depth relationship of Christian community than through structure. The study calls the residential parish to depth-relationship-in-community which will counteract the negative forces of a rending culture and the traditional structures of the local church which keep Christians busy, yet out of Christian relationship.

*Christian witness*, the service of God in the service of men, is viewed as one of the dual foci, the community of the church, is the other. While the concentration of this study is upon the latter, there is an inherent recognition that neither exists exclusively and

that the importance of the community body of Christ is its mission thrust to the world.

*Ministry* is used as the role designation of all Christians; there is no exaltation of the professional ministry as in any sense *the* ministry. Ministry is plurality.

### Basic Assumptions

This dissertation is about the possibilities of the suburban church as the investigator has experienced them. The intention is the transmittal of an understanding of Christian community which may supplant existing attempts to modernize the churches, but which are cut off from basic understanding of Christian theology and doctrine. Chapter I suggests that a crisis of relevance exists for the residential parish. Chapter II is an analysis of the model lifting it up as an exemplary experiment. Chapter III is a presentation of the sociology and theology of the church and community of faith contained in Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, and a critique of the model. Chapter IV is a parallel development of the theological motif of Christian community contained in the work of William Stringfellow. Chapter V is concerned with a statement of Christian community, a recognition of the importance of both Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow to that understanding, and a practical revision of the model. Chapter VI contains a short summary and abstract of the dissertation.

## CHAPTER II

### CONGREGATIONAL MODEL

The suburban crisis characterized in the Introduction was very much a part of the life of the Temple City community. As a bedroom community of the industrial center of the Los Angeles basin, it was (and is) victim to all of the forces of impersonality, loneliness, and exclusiveness recognized in the movement to the suburban areas.

The simple, rather traditional, neighbor to neighbor friendliness common in the first half of the century has been displaced by the quest for privacy. A prime example has been the rapid-fire building of apartment units in the city; apartment units noted for their limited access to those not living in them. Another measure of protection of privacy was noted until recently in the restrictive covenants on real estate holdings which kept the community homogeneous and rather secure in its self-determination.

What may be identified as a suburban psyche prevailed. Islands of security (neighborhoods) continue to be the predominant pattern of living--islands of safety which represent fortresses against encroachments from the dynamic forces at work in the centers of society and social conflict. Pushed further, this suburban psyche takes on the predominant tone of impersonality in most necessary social relationships as residents relate to persons as semi-strangers who are necessary in only auxiliary ways to the maintenance of the "cloister of privatism." Far from being abandoned in the city, this

treatment of people as functions or roles rather than persons permeates the very fabric of the suburbs.

Masks emerge which protect and insulate. Masks may actually take the place of "faces" as suburbanites lose their ability to toss them aside, even in the confines of their own homes. A loss of personhood, and therefore a loss of the ability to relate on a meaningful level became the major counseling problems of helping agencies in the area.

But Temple City, and thousands of suburbs like it elsewhere in America, cannot escape the problems of changing community by returning to archetypal structures of previous generations. The rural life of the small community is gone. The rural family-style churches, if they survive at all, cease to have a relevant and Christian gospel to share with the world it finds itself in. The contemporary crisis of community cannot be escaped geographically, psychologically, or theologically. The present situation, with all of its dynamic and unsettling influence must be recognized as crisis. The suburb *is* in a crisis of community, ever continuing and changing.

The church does not pass through crisis unscathed. The racial crisis, the crisis of identity, the effect of leisure and welfare, the economic crisis created by technology and unemployment, all of these must be embraced as symptoms that life in suburbia lacks the wholeness and meaning that it requires. The traditional institution of community formation-preservation, i.e. the church, must look again at the problems of Christian community.

Yet this is only one-half of the story. The situation in Temple City between 1966 and 1968 was more than a crisis compounded; it was accepted as a challenge of community rebuilding by the leadership of this Christian congregation. The realization was often repeated during those two and one-half years that even in the area's brokenness lay the seeds of community: *interdependence*. This was a key reality; interdependence has always been the basis of whatever was meant by genuine community, a centering upon the strengths that surpassed the fragmentations and divisions.

Ultimately a church structure had to be developed which demonstrated to the larger human community and to the greater church that a suburban congregation is a tangible expression of God's intention for our humanity. This called for a recognition of the church's failure to take seriously the human family; it meant fears for broken promises and unrealized dreams. It also meant pushing beyond the set, the omnipotent "already," to the untried and unproven. Such a move would never have traveled the first mile, had the professional staff and membership not rooted itself in the conviction that the residential congregation is a viable expression of gospel and builder of Christian community.

The leadership focused sharply on the family and on the residential basis of the congregation, which in itself was not radically different. The peculiarity of the approach hinged on the fact that the community was to be built upon common features: location and interdependence. Concentrating on proximity as a strength, the church

would have to build towards relationship in the geographical areas, rather than to assume it present in family structures. This difference of focus went beyond the traditional pattern of building upon the family, for developments in recent years have demonstrated the weakness of such a blanket assumption of inherent strength.

Coupled with this determination to place the church in an active role as developer of community was the church's increased freedom to assume such a role. That is, giving positive value to the crisis which has removed the church from the role of governing, dominating life in established patterns. It has the opportunity once again to be a serving community, wherein it continues to raise the questions of man's threefold relationships: to himself, his fellows, his God. Creative functions are freed from the mere conserving.

#### LOVING COMMUNITY

"Loving community" is the term ascribed to the movement of this congregation; its theological statement is largely contained in the preaching of Dr. Dennis Savage.

Look what *happens* to individuals of this congregation--men and women have come from the most different backgrounds and in all conditions of life. Here they have met God in Christ and what happened? Lives have been changed! Marriages have taken on new depth and meaning. There is a new sensitivity; a new concern for others, a new sense of worth within self and within others. No wonder Paul wrote about becoming 'new creations' when we believe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dennis Savage, then pastor, Temple City Christian Church, in a sermon, February 4, 1968.



Dr. Savage describes the results of Christian community, i.e., consequences of his understanding of the nature of the *Christian* community. The components of that understanding are evident in his preaching and his employment of the biblical and theological traditions.

1. "The truth is that we neither live nor die as self-contained units. At every turn, life links us to God" (Romans 14:7-8). The style of life for Christian man mandated by the gospel is one of *interdependence*. Remarkably, the common feature of the suburb is interdependence; thus the ground for Christian community in suburbia is already prepared, what remains is its actualization of the latent power for relationship.

2. As a loving community, *the church is a respecter of persons*, even in times of conflict which temper and potentially strengthen the community bonds. As Dr. Savage illustrated with this excerpt from Tillich: "Love must destroy what is against love, but not him who is the bearer of that which is against love."<sup>2</sup>

3. *The loving community is a disciplined community*. The following are disciplines outlined for the congregation in a sermon, "Without Measure":

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| a. Giving oneself | We need to listen and observe what others reflect to us, so we can know what kind of a being we are, and set out to improve ourselves to be the |
|-------------------|---|

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<sup>2</sup>Dennis Savage, in a sermon, February 18, 1968, citing Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 114.

best gift possible that we can give another.

b. Accepting others

It's difficult to accept another as he is and not remodel him as we think he should be! At the same time it does mean that we reflect and influence him toward what we feel to be God's will. The main point here is to avoid passing final judgment! Always leave the door open! Allow him the freedom to be-- but don't let him walk all over you. You have responsibility to exert your integrity!

c. Love within the bounds of truth and freedom.

Love demands truth. Love is not expressed when it is covered with platitudes and syrupy expressions meant only to avoid momentary pain.

d. Learn to listen

We must learn to listen--to pay attention watching the eyes, facial expressions, hands, body posture. Listen to the voice. Is it loud? Up 3 notes? Is there tension in it? We need to listen for the real question behind the casual word or deed. Didn't Jesus urge his followers to have eyes that see and ears that hear?

e. Learn how to covenant

Learn how to covenant, to be responsible. This means fulfilling obligations when selfishly we'd rather do something else. It means feeling a sense of responsibility for another person without impinging on his right to be. It means we may have to shine the light in the dark corners of a loved one and reveal to him what we see there; but it also means offering him the same opportunity to reveal to us. This discipline requires much practice.

f. Respect

We need to develop respect for others and self equally. We can have concern and not have respect, which means "to look at"--or to reflect, which means "to receive reflections until we see

bits of truth, bits of love, bits of goodness along with all the shortcomings! Respect implies hope, faith, trust--and God indwelling!"<sup>3</sup>

4. *The loving community is not the perfect community*; the perfect community might be a contemporary analogue for the Kingdom of God, but must not be equated with the loving community of the church. Love, within the bounds of Christian community is not perfection. "It means change, transformation, tension, conflict, growth, new value, but no one arrives. . . ." <sup>4</sup> This congregation is no resting place.

5. The church, the loving community in suburbia, is the *center of life* there. This active-community concept runs counter to the movement of the church to the sidelines, to marginality, yet it calls forth a new pattern of community life to give man the supportive, effective depth he requires for his full humanity. Thus the loving community must be open--more accepting, more reflecting, more listening, sharing more, confronting more, risking more. By *being* loving community, the church is the church!<sup>5</sup>

6. The loving community, to be the church, must be loyal to God-in-Christ.<sup>6</sup> Its mission is to know God and to make him known by the community's life in relation to the world. It must never allow itself to be intimidated, limited or controlled by any person, government, nation, business, or group. The dimension of its love cuts

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Dennis Savage, in a sermon, Spring, 1967.

through such cross loyalties and limitations.

One of the components enumerated above deserves special attention, for its biblical development provides an historical analogue to the developing Christian community, and the concept itself provides the thread which holds the fabric of community together. The concept: covenant. In an ordination service incorporating covenant as a theme, Dr. Savage stated:

We are indebted to the ancient Hebrews for demonstrating the need of covenant in human relationships. As they moved from nomadic wanderers to a collection of slaves, to a community with a purpose, they increased in their need for God in their midst, and responded to Him with an unconditional covenant. 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' And Moses took a great host of the Hollywood extras that were available at the time, and led them to the edge of the promised land.

Their experience of covenant was an experience of trust, and though in moments of weakness they would cry, 'We were better off in Egypt,' the presence of the cloud by day and fire by night, the sign that God was unconditional, always present, this sign gave strength to their weak knees. They became a new people from having been no people, they trusted the covenant. The trust begat suffering, as they became a nation, then divided kingdom, then an oppressed people that tinkered with legalistic machinery. But God burst upon them with a new covenant in the form of a man walking among them in pure love, showing that compassion, justice, love, peace, in human beings, is really the nature of the heart of God.

The biblical meaning of covenant is that God is always present in your life and in the trusting community. He will lead you into suffering and joy. Your response is an unconditional living into that presence.

Such living is not a contract, to be stretched or broken at will, but requires all of you forever. The biblical covenant settles for nothing less.<sup>7</sup>

The Temple City Christian Church, viewed in the light of a covenanted loving community made an exodus journey all its own. It

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<sup>7</sup>Dennis Savage, in an ordination sermon for Jon A. Lacey, October 5, 1969.

was a movement from a fairly "normal," tacitly effective congregation to a ministering loving community. That movement was one of relationships but also of structures of congregational life which gave shape to the "loving community" concept.

### LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

For the purposes of this study a division is made between leadership structures and educational structures.

A recent interview with three Disciple leaders (two ministers and one layman) identified the areas of greatest concern in our patterns of leadership. That interview isolated three major themes: (1) that most local congregations are organized on the basis of mistrust; (2) general boards and departments as constituted in most Disciple churches are counter-productive, limiting individual and corporate creativity and mission; and (3) congregational organization must be streamlined to allow for the mission and witness of the church.<sup>8</sup> Used to describe Disciple churches generally, the criticism offered is valid particularly, as in the case of the congregation under study.

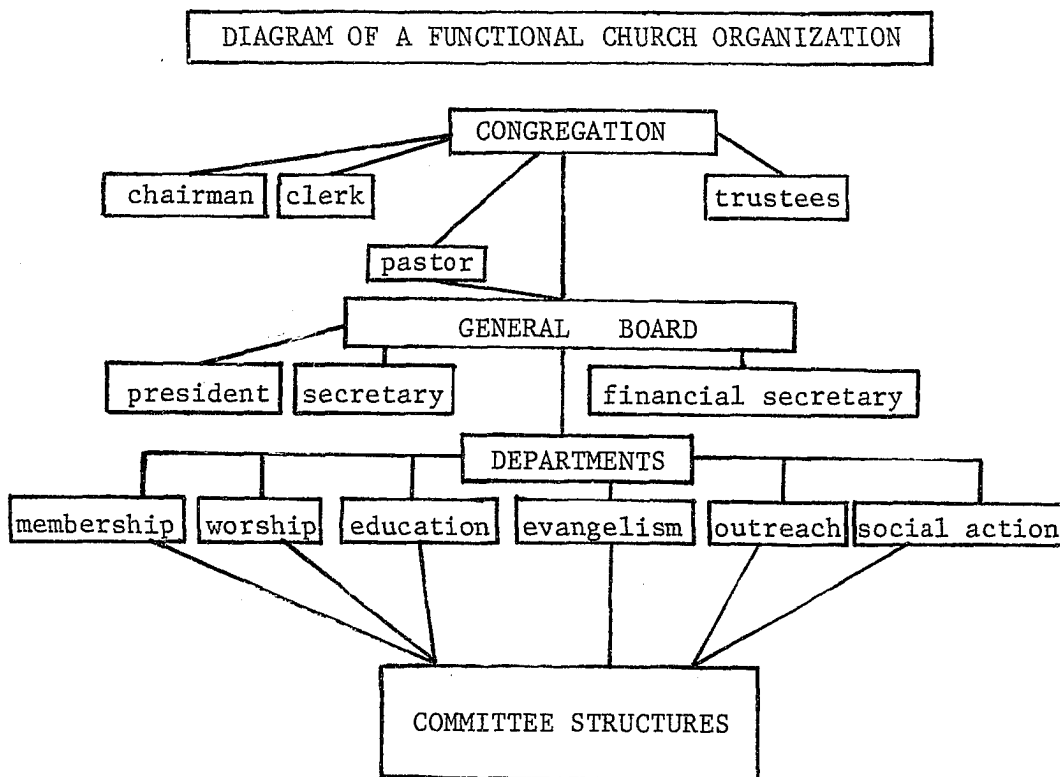
Inherited from earlier periods of ministry was a "functional" structure created to service the institution at all levels, congregational, denominational, and missional. As can be seen in the accompanying organizational chart, the majority of energy was spent planning "Christian activities" for the church community; a process that while

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<sup>8</sup>Vernon D. Ummel (ed.) "Administreating the Local Congregation," *Direction*, IV:6 (February 1971), 1-2.

sophisticated and polished, made little allowance for agenda from the wider community and engaged Christians in planning as the major outgrowth of a sense of mission. This diagram makes evident the placement of energies and the large number of Christians necessary to "man" the various levels.

FIGURE 1



The leadership dynamic upon which this structure depended was one of involvement in planning, planning for the institution. The "ministry to the world" was the task of *the* minister, the paid professional, who acted as a kind of executive secretary and pastoral counselor. Needless to say, this structure owed more to the colonial town meeting of our heritage than to New Testament practice or early Disciple thought.

A revised structure for ministry was developed by Dr. Savage which relied heavily upon the concept of shared ministerial responsibility. The eldership, recently relegated to sacerdotal importance only, was to be utilized as a strength of the congregational, residential parish. Relying upon Campbell's<sup>9</sup> understanding of a *plurality of ministry*, Dr. Savage and the energetic lay leadership set about the creation of a relevant description of the eldership and its function in relationship to the professional leadership of the community.

The eldership, traditionally in Disciple practice a "lay" office of ministry, as something more than a pious presider at the communion table, was the goal of the defining process. Through the years a complete detachment from community oversight through delegation of duties to functional departments left the office of elder *functionally inoperative*. The task was not to bemoan a lost vitality; both the elders then in office (in 1966) and the congregation's leaders sought to re-awaken a sense of vital ministry for the fundamental part

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<sup>9</sup> Royal Humbert, *A Compend of the Theology of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1961), p. 169.

it must play in developing an effective, ministering community.

What is an elder and what should he do? The elder--the term from Campbell's time until relatively recent times denoted neither sexual bias nor age limitation--is a Christian person who responsibly shares the burdens of obedience to the Christian gospel to the extent of his understanding. He is called to his particular ministry by the Christian community of which he is a part for specific or general service to the community. He approaches his ministry as a layman only in the sense that his particular professional preparation may not be theological. In terms of particular responsibilities, the elder of the Temple City Christian Church is called to be a guide to his own family; an exemplary Christian, a model person with a depth and breadth dimension; a representative of the church to families and individuals in crisis and celebration; he looks to total complexity of human needs of members of the community; a steward, of his own and the community's resources; a maintainer of values; and an evangelist, a sharer of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

The elder, and the combined eldership, were specifically designated partners with the professional staff, sharing both traditional and innovative ministry. Recognition was made of this special relationship before the congregation in services of covenant and celebration. In terms of building Christian community in an already existent functional structure, this investment in persons took a distinctive

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<sup>10</sup>Based on unpublished materials developed for use at Temple City Christian Church, November, 1966.



shape: the limbs of a living organism.

The congregation was broken into "neighborhood groups" along residential lines, resulting in twelve roughly equal (numerically) groups. Elders were then assigned to each group as functioning pastors, as those responsible for building an awareness of persons and a network of relationships culminating in a "loving community."

Tied into this recycling of the congregation's energy was a survey of the church by the Stewardship Department which showed that members responded in proportion to concern shown them. Following is an important quotation from that report:

People become involved and then committed to Christ, as Love (God) expresses himself *through* us in Christian concern and community. THIS IS THE REASON FOR NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS!<sup>11</sup>

Building upon the strengths of inherent interdependence and geographical proximity, these "neighborhood groups" functioned as parishes within the congregation. They were not exclusive "house churches" but seedbeds for the relationships which fed into the larger congregational community. The groups provided a breakdown which permitted closer ties of relationship between "ministers" and people. Elders compiled member information on each family through personal contact, providing a resource for knowledge about the *persons* involved in the church, and relaying such information as birthdays, important occasions, honors, special health problems, transportation difficulties

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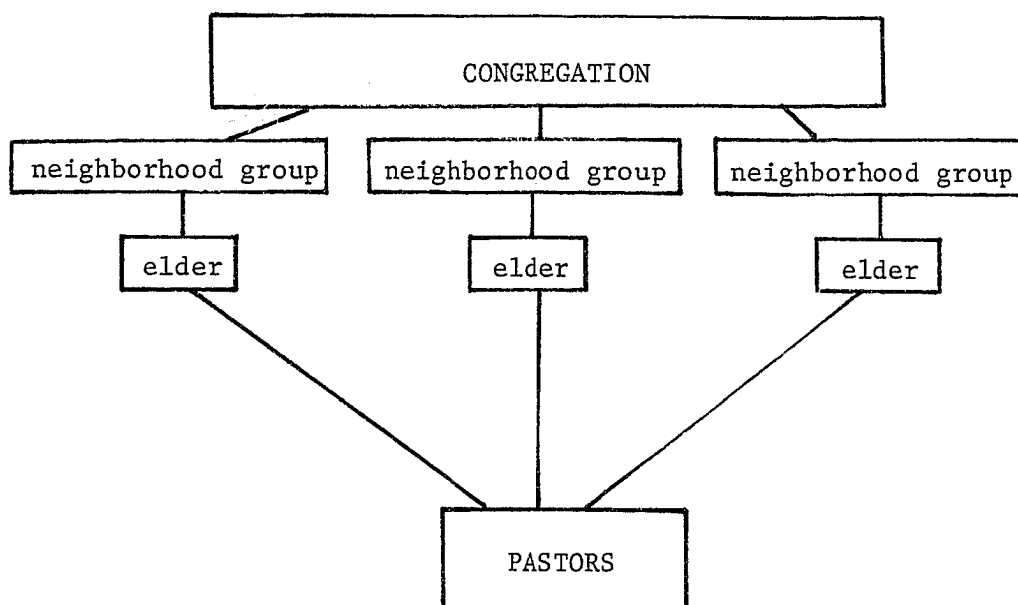
<sup>11</sup>Based on an unpublished survey of attitudes by the Stewardship Department, Temple City Christian Church, Fall, 1966.

and a myriad of other information helpful in being aware of who the community is. Beyond this important step of learning who the community was, the elders met individually and with their entire neighborhood groups, furnished important leadership for an evaluation of the Temple City congregation as it related to the needs and lives of real persons, rather than vague assumptions built upon past experience.

Functionally illustrative, Figure 2 shows the relationship of

FIGURE 2

DIAGRAM OF THE ELDERSHIP FOR TEMPLE CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH



the elders to the congregational structure. The grouping of the elders became a plurality of ministers, who were both supported and assisted by the professional staff.

During the initial period of experimentation (1966-1968) the functional department structure was left untouched and remained the "social action" arm of the congregation. The "neighborhood groups" provided the relationships and the manpower which was needed to man this functional structure. Individually some of the "neighborhood groups" adopted a social action stance, while others remained fellowship and supportive of individual ministries in nature.

An exciting outgrowth of one of the groups of the former type was a cadre of committed Christians led by elder Ray Moser, a former president of the congregation and active in the Ecumenical Institute training seminars emanating from Chicago. Building upon a core from his own "neighborhood group" Ray assisted in the development of a corporate discipline and covenant which moved radically beyond the normal "limits" of commitment to church and gospel. Quoting from the cadre's "Prologue to Corporate Discipline" gives an idea of the depth of commitment shared by these churchmen.

Before God and in the name of Jesus the Christ, we the undersigned community, freely take upon ourselves this covenant and style of life for the sake of thrusting our lives into history by undertaking those disciplines which will enable us to become aware, to become unintentional, and to engage in corporate mission.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>From "A Prologue to Corporate Discipline," a mimeographed covenant for a neighborhood cadre, Temple City Christian Church, Fall, 1967.

Further, reflective of the group's self-understanding:

We consider this corporate discipline as a creative experiment aimed at helping the radical renewal of the church which is called for in our time, and hope that it might become a model wherein local congregations may find an expression of what it means to be men of faith in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

Sensing the deeply human need for community:

In our corporate discipline we no longer live and work alone as isolated individuals. Our personal thinking and acting are embodied in this community which is itself part of the historical church. By our covenant we make explicitly intentional our responsibility as the people of God. However this covenant is not for the purpose of escaping selfhood. Our self-consciously disciplined community is not to swallow the individual but rather it is to create the very possibility of authentic personhood by pushing us against the necessity of deciding for ourselves and holding us accountable for the consequences of our action.<sup>14</sup>

In our corporate discipline we are responsible to and for each other. We must assume responsibility for intruding into the other's being up to the point of his freedom and in turn freely open ourselves to the other's responsibility to intrude into our life up to the point of our conscience before God. Though our corporate discipline necessarily includes explicit ways of accounting before one another, it is not to the end of maintaining the rule or for the sake of judgment, but rather to provide the opportunity for taking upon ourselves afresh our freedom to be responsible persons in mission.<sup>15</sup>

The depth of understanding of the nature of Christian community and responsibility found here was not characteristic of all of the "neighborhood groups" and should not therefore give a false impression of the success of the model, but the fact that such an understanding did grow out of the experience of Christian community speaks of some of its effect. Nor was the "Prologue" merely a cleverly worded document; members of the cadre actively assisted in the reorganization of

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

the Eastmont Parish (a Disciple community center located in East Los Angeles' Mexican American community), members sat upon the Blue Ribbon Committee appointed by the mayor of Temple City in the Spring of 1967 to delineate the needs and problems of the city, members assumed leadership roles in the congregation to intentionally re-create structures of community building in worship, education, and social action.

The clergy's role in this leadership structure was seen as "enablement" and support, providing structures and experiences which would help cause the rejuvenation of this residential community. The professional team ministry consisted of Dennis Savage, senior pastor; Jon A. Lacey, associate; and Pat Boggs, administrative assistant; and various part-time back-up personnel.

Augmenting the traditional role of preacher, healer, and priest, the role of "teaching elder" (roughly equivalent to the rabbi of the synagogue) was emphasized. This role of the professional pastor was highlighted because the ministers were viewed as the best equipped and informed persons in the congregation. The role was "master teacher." Distinction was made because of training and profession, but in the order of the church's ministry they were seen as one among the plurality.

Undergirding this role-understanding was the pastor's accessibility to a wide variety of teaching situations: preaching, board and committee meetings, small groups, one-to-one relationships. The other major functional role of the pastors was that of pastor, undergirding, supporting, blessing, training, and giving perspective to

persons in time of crisis.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the professional effort of the pastors spent during this period was directed toward developing skills of the eldership: sensitivity to persons, hospital call procedures, understanding the nature of Christian prayer, increasing ability to listen and express honest concern, how to develop the network of relationships necessary to the life of the community.

The major educational instrument used in the preparation of both the elders and the general community for "loving community" was the "Adventure Series" conceived and written by Dr. Savage.

#### EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES

The "Adventure Series" was designed as a series of three, ten-week experiences in developing a "loving community," led by individuals who had themselves been a part of such an experience and who felt sufficiently grounded to lead a group of fellow Christians seeking to grow in relationship with God and one another. Dr. Savage outlined several touchstones which were necessary to an understanding of the purpose of these groups in developing the "loving community":

1. Persons cannot achieve communion or perfection on their own. These moments in life come as persons respond to God's call to discipline, surrender, and open oneself to his will.
2. The community grows in depth in proportion to the risks taken in sharing.

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<sup>16</sup>William R. Terbeek, "An Outline of the Teaching Responsibility for the Area Church," Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Southern California-Nevada (1967), p. 1.

3. When communication takes place that unites, community is present.
4. In these groups is a person's opportunity to entrust more of life in deepening relationship with men and God. There is no magic ceremony, but the opportunity to communicate, and this requires a leap of faith.
5. We cannot force persons to change completely.
6. Loving community is of the moment. The loved community is a thing of history, of the past. Love is not static, it is active, penetrating, transforming, redeeming, relating.
7. To achieve such moments requires discipline and surrender. Wishful thinking will not bring such an experience. Pious pretensions and religious poses will not create loving community.
8. The church is loving community. It ignores denominational lines, racial restrictions, or national boundaries. It is not dependent on ancient creeds, laws or ceremonies, although some of these may be most helpful in creating situations and readiness for the spirit of God in Christ to manifest itself. The church is not hierarchy, history or heritage, although these things give evidence of what has been and what may be.<sup>17</sup>

The series', which were developed prior to the current trend to small groups and sensitivity training, sought to develop bridges of understanding--of self and others--and grounds for Christians to stand on together as the basis for their private and corporate lives. They were built upon a theory of learning, components of which stated that:

Persons learn

- through listening with growing alertness to the gospel and responding to it in faith and love.
- through exploring the whole field of relationships in light of the gospel.

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<sup>17</sup>Dennis Savage, *Invitation to Adventure* (Los Angeles: Christian Churches [Disciples of Christ] of Southern California and Southern Nevada), pp. 58ff.

- through the discovery of meaning and value in the field of relationships in light of the gospel.
- through personally appropriating the meaning and value they have discovered.
- through undertaking responsibility in light of the gospel ('gospel means God's whole redemptive action toward men, with its implications for man's response').<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Savage added to these borrowed components his own:

Persons can learn through exposure, or perception. Sometimes they are not aware that learning is taking place, or has taken place.

Persons learn by doing or practicing with repetition. This can be a controlled situation or with much individual freedom. People tend to learn at their own rate of skill and readiness.

As an individual or group works on a specific project or problem, they find much learning taking place through interaction and sharing.

Persons can learn through identification. All of us can gain knowledge and understanding vicariously--through another person, a book, etc.<sup>19</sup>

The design for these groups included a maximum of eighteen members for each group, with a desired group at twelve. Each leader used a specially prepared copy of *Invitation to Adventure*, the guide developed by Dr. Savage, and in the case of series number one, a copy of Albert Day's book, *Discipline and Discovery*. The other series drew upon numerous other resources, i.e., *The Interpreter's Bible*, commentaries, contemporary church authors, and their own experiences of loving community. Sessions were designed to explore the relationship of God and his will for the human community, prayer, relationships of trust, self-identity and understanding, relationships with God, self

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, citing "Analysis of the Learning Task," in *The Objectives of Christian Education for Senior High Young People* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1958), p. 34.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1.



and others, and grounding relationships in the loving community.

The expectation was that the initial groups would provide a nucleus of leaders who would provide both a continuing core for the leading of the series and elders skilled and aware enough to "people" the plural ministry. The series was successful on both counts, providing in the beginning the leadership necessary for the eldership, and eventually providing the leadership resources for the "Adventure Series" which made it possible to provide the series in any number of Christian Church congregations in the Southern California area.

The "Adventure Series" program began at a point in time prior to the eldership experiment and coincided with that development in 1966. But the series was not the only educational program of the church subject to experimentation. The church's educational program was open to experimentation, both of design and implementation. From the beginning the recognition was made that there would probably remain a group which would prefer biblically oriented, traditional study materials from the Disciples' publishing house. Allowance was made for them to retain that character. For the others a thematic series format was followed, adhering to themes relevant to current crisis and developments such as the Love Education Series (which followed a cross-generational approach to sex, love, marriage and depth relationships), a series entitled "Plain Talk for White Christians" which explored the implications of the Christian faith in decision making in suburbia after the Watt's disturbance, and a biblically oriented series entitled "The Old Testament and My Life."

This last series was built upon the relationships in community that had been building in the two year study period and was organized on the basis of the "neighborhood groups," with elders, or others assigned to assist them, as the teachers of their congregation's of twenty to twenty-five people. Materials were provided which gave brief outlines for discovery; such things as how to motivate people to grow in their concept of God, how to assist people in focusing their beliefs and daily lives in God. Each of these outlines included purpose, a key method for discovery and searching together, suggested activities, assignments, and bibliography of helpful materials. These materials were confessionally written rather than professionally prepared; that is, each session was prepared by an individual or a family, sharing insight rooted in experiences of the community. The purpose behind this procedure was to develop insightful and anecdotal material rooted in these persons' lives and understanding of the Gospel.

In some instances sessions were conducted in elder's homes on Sunday mornings with groups converging on the sanctuary for worship; in other instances, where proximity to the sanctuary was not convenient, classes were held in the fellowship hall and educational wing of the facility, retaining the "neighborhood group" format. Experimentation with worship in "neighborhood groups" was employed on a limited basis, primarily on Maundy Thursday and a few designated Sundays, where worship was either suspended in the sanctuary setting or held there only for those not desirous of worshiping in the small group settings. This was an area where further experimentation would be helpful.

There was a demonstrated reluctance for the community to worship dispersed. Part of this can probably be understood by reference to Dr. Savage's own interpretation of worship found in Session ten of the participant's material in *Invitation to Adventure*. The key definition which he employs is this: "Worship is dialogue between man and God and man and man. When there is communication, the kind that unites, there you have community. It is in worship that man can sense oneness with man and God."<sup>20</sup> If this is a primary understanding of worship, then the congregation experiences its wholeness in worship. Participating in the development of a loving community in Adventure Series and "neighborhood groups," worshipers became aware of the importance of symbolic acts both signifying and creating community. Corporate worship took on new meaning; the realization was made that "Worship is no magic ceremony, but the opportunity to communicate with God and man on deeper levels--deep down inside in the inner being."

A changed understanding demanded reformed worship; forms given their place by use and familiarity caused questions of worship's value to be asked afresh. Interestingly enough, few radical departures were made from the patterns of corporate worship. Emphasis was upon enlivening existing forms with fresh approaches to participation: families as a whole presiding over worship with various members taking readings, invocation, etc.; replacement of the traditional pastoral prayer by a series of three prayers, two coming from selected

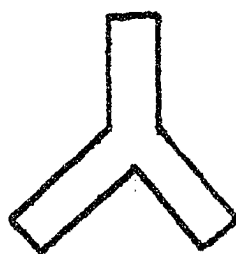
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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

individuals from their places in the congregation, the concluding one from one of the pastors; regular use of various styles of communicating the Gospel, lay preaching, dialogue preaching; drawing upon liturgical materials from various traditions; encouraging development of new worship materials by individuals and families within the religious community. Recognition was made of significant Christian art and symbolism, including the generous use of the trefoil (Figure 3, below) in the interior and exterior architectural treatment of the sanctuary. This was especially significant because of its dominance and because of its various meanings for the Christian community: trinity, grace (interpreted as the arms of God outstretched to man), when inverted, man's arms open to receive God.

FIGURE 3

TREFOIL DESIGN



The people of God calling themselves the Temple City Christian Church grew out of a tradition strongly influenced by a plurality of ministry; its life-style, this so-called "loving community," was its attempt to recapture the vitality of community building in a form or structure. With the growth of any fellowship group a structure of

organization is required, in order to be identified and to move as a force within society as a whole.

This modeling of a congregation after a concept of loving community is a response to the church in suburbia; it is a recognition of the suburb as a missional scene, a locale of major problems and challenges. It is built upon the assumption that suburbia and the suburban church constitute a root problem--the fractioning of community. It is nothing less than a community-shaped church. "God shaped himself according to the human condition; Jesus Christ took the form of our humanity to reveal the image of God. The church can do no less."

What remains are questions. Shall man see himself in the imagery of the machine or of community? What is *Christian* community, is it differentiated from other types of community? If so, is our model of "loving community" built upon an adequate understanding of Christian theology? Is this church justified in saying by its structure and life style that the Christian doctrine of community has become the main focus of theological thought, and that it is of decisive relevance for the Christian approach to society? These are but some of the questions which await answers for an adequate theological evaluation of this model congregation.

### CHAPTER III

#### BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGICAL SOCIOLOGY

*Sanctorum Communio* was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's first work. It was presented to the Berlin Theological Faculty in 1927 as his doctoral dissertation; Bonhoeffer was twenty-one. The dual base which he chose as his foundation contained conflicting points of departure and commitment: systematic theology and sociology. Thus the full title translated is: *The Communion of Saints, A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*. "What he tried to give in *Sanctorum Communio*," reports Eberhard Bethge in his foreword, "was a sociological theology of the church, or a theological sociology. He turned to his task with immense self-conscious power."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of Bonhoeffer's work is not lost on this study of structures of Christian community; both his sociology and theology are immensely important. Yet even in his day Bonhoeffer found readers for his "sociological theology" scarce. In later years, when he focused his attentions on formulations of his now famous "religionless Christianity," his readers' attention was drawn to this primary work on the nature of the church.

*Sanctorum Communio*, being Bonhoeffer's primary work on the sociological and theological nature of the church and Christian community, was the focus of this portion of the study. No claim is

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<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), i.

made to exhaustive treatment of any of his other major documents.

This chapter is devoted to an understanding of Bonhoeffer's use of the term "sanctorum communio" and his employment of that term in his conception of the nature of the Christian community. For matters of this study, the chapter is broken into three headings: Sanctorum Communio, The Empirical Church, Cautions and Critiques.

### SANCTORUM COMMUNIO

What follows is an attempt to communicate the thrust of Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the precise point of interest of this study: Christian community. For Bonhoeffer, as we'll see at various points in this study, there are several different "communities." First, there was the original community of love, man's primal state, broken by his sin; there is the community of humankind, of which all are a part by our common humanity; there are religious communities; there is the Christian community; and finally, there is the *sanctorum communio*, the communion (or community) of the saints.

Following the pattern of Bonhoeffer's own discussion, we come upon components essential to an understanding of Christian community. "Spirituality bound up in sociality,"<sup>2</sup> is one that is helpful in securing a foothold. Contained in these few words is an indication of the essential "ingredient" of Christian community which distinguishes it as a distinct sociological institution. It is the reference

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 81.

to spirituality which causes the church to examine carefully its origins and its nature as a community. Christian community is no mere accidental inclination of men; it is essential to the nature of the relationship between God and man, man and man.

Bonhoeffer phrased this differently: "The concept of the church is possible only in the sphere of reality based on God. The reality of the church is the reality of revelation."<sup>3</sup> The church is no mere sociological obscurity, it is a center of action which is proper to the experience of God's people, and its life is a particular mode of activity incumbent upon the community.

Drawing upon Pauline thought, Bonhoeffer describes this community by using the important concept of "body." But the concept of "body" he employs is not an objectively established entity, it is one experienced subjectively and functionally. Using language reminiscent of Buber's "I" and "Thou," Bonhoeffer relates this functional "body" concept to the "I"; the "body" of the church is to a member of it what my "I" is to the physical body that "I" possess.<sup>4</sup>

This use of "I" becomes highly important--it is the "I"'s which are related to one another in Christian community. In his words:

The I which has become a person experiences the bond only with other individual I's which have become persons, and it is only to these I's that the concept of community can be applied. All others belong only in possibility to community.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.



Viewed with the question: "What does it take to become a person?" in mind, the centrality of the issue for the discussion is not hard to discern. The model structure itself proposes to relate persons to persons, in a grounded, distinctly Christian community. On what basis does that model and Bonhoeffer build this idea of person?

For Bonhoeffer mankind itself must be regarded as a community of sorts<sup>6</sup> due to the common grounds of experience and the human need for sociality. Christian community, however, is a distinct sociological structure which breaks the continuity of history and human expectations with its life principle of *vicarious action*.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian community is not a society of people; it is a peculiar community which has as its symbol the Cross--the very essence of vicarious action of Christ for man. The Cross is both promise and sentence; sentence to the utmost loneliness of man and promise of the closest possible fellowship. Jesus, declares Bonhoeffer, now declares that essentially the whole primal community has fallen away from God;<sup>8</sup> it must be remolded into a new community of persons adopting a Christ form of reference. "This is the life-principle of the new basic relationships of social existence."<sup>9</sup> Each man, because of the vicarious action of Jesus, is reconciled to God without his own strength or merit.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

Quoting Bonhoeffer:

The man living in the fellowship of the I-Thou relationship is given the certainty that he is loved, and through his faith in Christ receives the strength to be able to love in return, in that he, who in Christ is already in the church, is led into the church. He no longer sees the other members of the church essentially as a claim, but as a gift, as a revelation of His love, that is, of God's love, and of his heart, that is, God's heart, so that the Thou is to the I no longer law but gospel, and hence an object of love. The fact that my claim is fulfilled for me by the other I who loves me--which means, in fact, by Christ--humbles me, frees me from the fangs of my I and lets me love the other--once again, indeed, in virtue of faith in Christ--lets me give and reveal myself entirely to him.<sup>10</sup>

Since the "other" is always seen as gift, no special claims or judgments can be made against him; the Christian, acting out of faith, receives the "other" as he would receive Christ. Ultimately this vicariousness demands a new set of social relationships, relationships uniquely influenced by the Christian idea of *agapé*. Bonhoeffer recognizes two thrusts of the New Testament concept of love, one the positive love of God, the other the negative love of self. Elements of his discussion follow.

1. *Christian love is not a human possibility.*<sup>11</sup> Christian love has nothing to do with altruism, feeling, liking, or sympathy--which we are careless to load the term with.

2. *Christian love is possible only through faith in Christ.*<sup>12</sup> The vicariousness of the Christian is neither natural nor easy-coming to man; it is the work of the Holy Spirit. "Only through faith do we

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

understand our love as love of God."<sup>13</sup> Response to the love that demands no claim upon God or man is Christian, all other love is self-love.<sup>14</sup> This love is seen as obedience to God.

3. *Love, as an act of will is purposive.*<sup>15</sup> It is a recognition of God's desired response; it is no baseless inclination dictated by one's conscience out of sense of guilt or false idea of duty. It is " . . . exclusively determined by what God's will is for the other man. The means are infinitely varied, [and] . . . cannot be formulated as a set of principles."<sup>16</sup> Each person must develop his own response, "but it is the whole man who must give himself, with all his strength to be a means for reaching [God's] end."<sup>17</sup>

4. *Christian love loves the real neighbor.*<sup>18</sup> Motivations for love are swept away by Bonhoeffer; motivations commonly heard from pulpits and in the pew. The Christian does not love his neighbor because of any pleasure that he might receive from a charitable act, he loves his neighbor because he is his neighbor, because he experiences God's claim upon him in this love relationship. Neither does the Christian love his neighbor because he sees God in him: "He does not love God in his neighbour, but loves the concrete Thou [of his neighbour]; he loves him by placing his own self, his entire will, at his service."<sup>19</sup> Our acts of love viewed by God are our obedience; "God

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

uses our obedience exercised in our love of our neighbor to carry out his will."<sup>20</sup>

5. *Christian love knows no limits.*<sup>21</sup> Limitations, restrictions, or qualifications of love are not within our realm of freedom. Limits are set only where God himself has set them, "but man does not know where God condemns [limits] . . . the command that we should love our neighbor, that is, obey, is given without any reservation so that His love is boundless."<sup>22</sup> Even clearer:

Love of one's neighbour is man's will for God's will for the other man; God's will for the other man is characterized for us by the command that we should unreservedly surrender our own will to our neighbour, and thus neither love him in God's place, nor love God in him, but set the other in our own self's place and love him instead of ourselves . . .<sup>23</sup>

It is clear from his discussion that Bonhoeffer stresses two points important to an understanding of the new social relationships of the Christian community: that unconditional love is man's obedience to God, and that love is directed toward the concrete. An interesting point of Bonhoeffer's discussion is the playing down of love of self, and the motive of reciprocation in the formation of the community of love. He devotes what may be an inadequate amount of energy to this point and leaves us with two phrases which reflect some uneasiness about his treatment.

Bonhoeffer himself says that "it is part of the intentional

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

nature of love as will directed towards the other man in his concrete being, that it should seek to form community, that is, to kindle love in return."<sup>24</sup> Citing Scheler, Bonhoeffer clarifies this insight: "While love certainly does not aim at receiving love in return, it nevertheless lies in love's intention to seek reciprocation."<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps this desire for reciprocation, this quest which is ultimately expressed as a need to be loved, which challenges the purity of man's obedience to the will of God. Is man in the twentieth century church primarily motivated by his obedience or by his conscious and unconscious quest for community which counters his groundlessness in a technological era? The problem of the suburban church may be right at this point, "What is the basis of the appeal to persons, obedience or experience?" This question will have to be answered, especially in terms of the projected model.

Although the specific question is not asked, the problem of purity or perfection of the community's obedience is approached in the fundamental difference between the *sanctorum communio* and what Bonhoeffer variously calls a "community of new persons" and "community of love." Communion is characterized by the love which it expresses in each person's *complete* surrender to obedience; the *sanctorum communio* is constituted of those in the community of faith who are

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, citing M. F. Scheler, *Wesen Und Formen Der Sympathie* (Bonn: Cohen, 1923).

*exclusively* dedicated to the achievement of God's will.<sup>26</sup> *Sanctorum communio* and the community of faith overlap, differentiated by their degrees of perfection of obedience. Thus the *sanctorum communio* is active in the community of faith.

How is the *sanctorum communio* active in a community of love? What are the social acts constituting the community of love, which set it apart from other communities and which tell us in more detail about the structure and nature of the Christian church?

Such acts fall into two categories:

1. "the God-appointed structural 'togetherness' of the church and each of its members;
2. "the fact that the members act for one another and the principle of vicarious action."<sup>27</sup>

In the experience of the church these two are, of course, inseparable and complementary. Another way of characterizing the types of social acts constituting the community of love are "being *with* one another" and "being *for* one another." The former relates to the community of love as revelatory of God's will for men--the God-given foundation for the community's existence; the latter characterizes the style of life which is to reign in the community.

"Being with one another" needs limited amplification beyond this citation from an earlier passage dealing with the eschatological meaning of the community of love: "The community which is from God

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

to God, which bears within it an eschatological meaning--this community stands in God's sight, and does not dissolve into the fate of the many."<sup>28</sup> The community is not only indebted to God for its existence, but each member carries vicariously the burden of representing the entire Christian community. "He can see the whole people in a few individuals, just as he saw and reconciled the whole of mankind in one man."<sup>29</sup> More importantly, regardless of the quality of experience of the community, it is the obedience to God's will in Christ and for man that makes the community Christian, which radically humbles strategies and structures designed to create community.

To define "being *for* one's neighbor" Bonhoeffer formulates a remarkable and important concept:

The man whose life is lived in love is Christ in respect of his neighbour--but of course, always in this respect only. 'We are God through the love that makes us do good to our neighbour.' Such a man can and should act like Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Two important elements are inherent in this concept. One is that built upon New Testament authority (John 13:5, 34ff.; 1 John 3:10) Christ is the only measure for conduct as a Christian.<sup>31</sup> The other is that the Christian's conduct is that of a member of the functional body of Christ and is one who is equipped with the strength of Christ's love (1 Cor. 12:12; Rom. 12:4ff; Eph. 4:4, 12ff.; Col. 3:15)<sup>32</sup> which replaces human love.

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

The Christian described then is one who totally replaces self-interest with the interest of his brother (God's will for him). He is, ideally, a member of the communion of saints, for, as Bonhoeffer states, "man is meant to be active in the church with all the strength he owes it"<sup>33</sup>--and he owes it his life which he receives as a gift from God. Gratitude, rather than duty, motivates the Christian's adoption of obedience and love, and pious intentions are swept away.

The Christian community acts with three possibilities.

(1) Renunciation. (2) Prayers of intercession. (3) Mutual granting of forgiveness of sins. The church's first activity is renunciation; rejection of self-interest modeled after the Christ-example.<sup>34</sup> Its second activity is prayers of intercession; *becoming* a prayer of obedience, *becoming* a Christ for neighbor.<sup>35</sup> Its third important function is the mutual granting of forgiveness of sins;<sup>36</sup> recognizing that it is the body of Christ, empowered by God to be the Christ to the human community.

Important in a day when many are bolting the church is Bonhoeffer's declaration that "as a Christian a man cannot boast of his aloneness with God; his strength comes from the church."<sup>37</sup> Noting the imperfections of the institution of the church, Bonhoeffer reminds Christians of the transcendent quality of the Christian community, that it is not a human institution, that the dimension of the Holy

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 133.



Spirit's activity makes it more than the sum of its various parts and that its importance lies in its eschatological significance.<sup>38</sup>

Summarizing the new basic social relationships of *sanctorum communio* in the community of love may be helpful.

1. The basic relationship of community in the primal state, broken by Adam and by subsequent men by the replacement of the movement of love by egocentric movement, is restored by God's action in Christ and the Holy Spirit.
2. The Christian community is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love.
3. The relationship between I and Thou is no longer essentially a demanding one but a giving one.
4. The Christian comes into being and exists only in the church. He is dependent upon his fellow man in community.
5. Each man sustains the other in active love, intercession and forgiveness of sins through vicarious action. This activity is possible only in the church, resting as it does entirely upon the principle of vicarious action (the love of God). Thus the Christian community is unique.
6. The church and its members structurally together, act vicariously for one another, in the context of the strength of the church.<sup>39</sup>

This together constitutes the specific sociological character of community based on love.

What then of the empirical church?

#### EMPIRICAL CHURCH

"The church of Jesus Christ actualised by the Holy Spirit is at the present moment really the church."<sup>40</sup> The empirical church existent

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144.

and functioning in the present human experience is the historical result of the work of Christ with the human community. The objective spirit of the Christian community (referred to above as vicariousness) is the church in its development and being, its transmitted forms and structures, and its present vitality and effectiveness.<sup>41</sup> True to obedience, it carries visibly the authentication of its own life.<sup>42</sup>

But the church is not always true in obedience; as a community both human and Christian in potentiality, it is heir to two sources which resist actualisation of the *sanctorum communio*: human imperfection and sin.<sup>43</sup> Imperfection, on the one hand is the natural state of man, *his* institutions and communities are bound by their nature to fall short of the ideal *sanctorum communio*. It is expected and justified in light of God's gift to man. On the other hand, sin, when it breaks away from obedience is an act of will which exchanges self love for vicarious love. The church, a community of sinners<sup>44</sup> is ever a community falling, coming into existence anew. The sinful act--

The original community of love, as the repose of wills in mutual action is destroyed when one will exchanges the movement of love for an egocentric movement, and it is of the nature of the situation that the one who sees everyone around him abandoning the unbroken community and adopting an egocentric direction should himself take the same direction, for he sees that his own movement toward community is empty, and without response. This begins in the smallest circle and extends even farther . . .<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 81.

Thus, the church, due to man's nature, is not constantly a genuine organic life of fellowship and love; as an institution it is constantly being created and destroyed; as the church, the Body of Christ is ever present as the visible community. Despite its imperfection, perhaps because of its imperfections, the empirical church remains the body of Christ--and in that body there prevails a communal life in accordance with the laws of organic life (1 Cor. 1:12) bound together by love (Eph. 4:16, Col. 2:19).<sup>46</sup>

The empirical church maintains its integrity of purpose by obedience to God's will and the binding power of vicarious love, but it bears the stamp of its historical context. The empirical church lives both in history and in society.<sup>47</sup> Its life is forged in the crucible of history, it is broken, shattered, stepped upon--but by its obedience and its faithfulness it is made the "church of Easter." Its life-giving strength is a gift; it perseveres because it is Christ's body, and has no strength or merit of its own. Without the Spirit and the uniqueness of vicarious love and life the empirical church is a religious community, but not a Christian community.

In his discussion of the empirical church, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that the entity of which he speaks is the local church or congregation. Referring to the revelatory nature of Christ for the church he says, "what is meant is the actual local church in which Christ is present to the visible community."<sup>48</sup> (Scripturally here he refers to the following passages: 1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19, 12:2; II Cor.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102.

6:16, Eph. 5:30.) It is clear, too, that he means by congregation, Christians who are gathered around the Word, forming a worshipping community.<sup>49</sup>

Both elements of the definition above are necessary. As a reminder, for Bonhoeffer the idea of a Christian who does not attach himself to the Christian community is unthinkable. Amplifying his concern, he says:

For us the preaching of the empirical church is the 'Word of God' we can hear. And this must be applied in the narrower sense to the historical, congregational form of the empirical church. The congregation of the faithful remains our Mother . . . the Christian feels he has never outgrown this place of his spiritual birth, so that he is prompted to seek the congregation not only out of gratitude for the gift he has received, but also because he prays that he might forever be born anew (John 3:3, II Cor. 4:16). . . .<sup>50</sup>

The Christian is drawn into the community by his rebirth, his movement from egocentric action to vicarious love; he retains his relationship with the empirical church out of gratitude, but even deeper, out of obedience to God's-will-about-man, which is the Christian community.

Summarizing for clarity, the empirical church (the local congregation) is:

1. willed by God. It is the means whereby God makes use of the social connection between men to spread his rule over men.
2. a worshipping congregation. Gathering around the Word is an essential part of the Church.
3. a statement of God about his intentions for man. The individual's link to the congregation arises from God's will to speak through the empirical church.
4. the organic link between the congregation and the individual, based on gratitude and obedience.

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

5. a place of hope. The individual adheres to the firm hope that in the congregation he will again and again, in concrete form, receive the assurance that he is part of God's loving community and that he lives in God's grace.<sup>51</sup>

If this is descriptive of the nature of Christian community, what does it have to say by way of critique of the model under study? It is necessary to raise questions seriously and not just as an extended exercise.

### CRITIQUE AND CAUTIONS

The model which we have considered is a renewal model; it has as its intention the "building up" of the Christian community in terms of depth and commitment to a style of congregational life termed "loving community." That should be clear from the presentation. Bonhoeffer humbles the design by asserting the sociological principle of the church: it is built on the Word.

Upon the Word the church 'builds itself up,' extensively and intensively . . . Christ is the foundation for the 'building up.' (1 Cor. 3; Eph. 2:20) The church grows into the Holy Temple of the Lord (Eph. 2:21) with a growth that is from God (Col. 2:19) . . . until we can all attain to a mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. (Eph. 4:13)<sup>52</sup>

His criticism is well received, for it would seem that the model comes close at times to a community development model without the dimension of Christ. The Christ element, while possibly insufficiently documented, was however a very real part of the experiences during the period of study.

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<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

More serious by way of critique is the emphasis upon "experiencing the church" not only in the model, but in the church proper and in some of the extra-institutional Christian movements. Bonhoeffer, even in 1927, warned the churches to avoid solemn pronouncements about "experiencing" the empirical church. Strongly worded, his warning rang: "It is not the experience that makes the church!"<sup>53</sup> The experience of the community of love is the church's sign; the church itself is established by God and exists in principle 'before' any experience of the church.<sup>54</sup> "The church is not made in great experiences of fellowship."<sup>55</sup>

We are well advised to listen to Bonhoeffer's denouncement of "community romanticism." We are likely to judge the presence of the Spirit by the "warm glow" or feeling of emotional experience. He warns of a soft sentimentality that has little to do with the concept of Christian love which he developed.

Yet while taking his warning seriously, another principle which he espoused must be employed. That principle is that the church can only be judged from the inside. Much of the experience which was generated in the Temple City congregation was Christian love--obedience to God's will for the other. The "Adventure Series" groups and the "neighborhood groups" became deeply aware of their need for obedience and for vicariousness. Read again the excerpts from the cadre prologue; there is a deep consciousness there of obedience to the will of God.

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<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

A key concept in Bonhoeffer's concept of vicariousness and the experience of the community is contained in his phrase "the I which has become a person." The model's educational structures, coupled with its community experiences of worship around the Word, were designed to enable persons to take part in a process of becoming --always with the recognition made that we never fully reach the goal of a loving community.

Ideally the training structure developed prepares Christian persons for vicarious ministry; practically speaking, it prepares some Christians for a designated ministry as vicar of Christ--the elders. The concrete concept of "neighbor" which Bonhoeffer employs is easily understood in the model of the neighborhood group, though employment of this ministry did not reach its potential.

The most serious question which is raised by Bonhoeffer remains the one of the basis of appeal to persons. What is the basis of the appeal, is it obedience or experience? It remains the most serious issue, not only for the model but for the suburban society, precisely because of the quest for experience, particularly grounding experience--experience which frees the rootless, anchors the drifting in a chaotic age. It is a question which needs to be dealt with at some length, and will be in Chapter V, along with other issues providing a firm basis for a revised congregational model.

## CHAPTER IV

### STRINGFELLOW'S SACRAMENTAL COMMUNITY

Unlike Bonhoeffer, William Stringfellow is not a professional academic theologian. He is a lawyer by training; an itinerant Christian of a somewhat prophetic strain by choice--choice being a very important ingredient of his thought about the nature of man. He is the author of several books, among them two which are of particular relevance to this study: *A Private and Public Faith* and *Free in Obedience*. His itinerancy has caused him to be involved on several frontiers in our society in what he calls "churchly" institutions, his most notable involvement being with the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York City. That involvement in the depths of a decaying city is responsible in large part for his personal commitment to the church on the frontiers of the city.

While he is not the noted scholar that Bonhoeffer was, his approach to the church as an eloquent and talented layman is fresh, if not always academically rigorous. The contributions which he can be expected to make concern his concept of ministry, both lay and priestly, the non-religious nature of the Christian community, and several important cautions about the distortion of the church, Body of Christ. As in the previous chapter, the discussion is divided into three sections: the nature of the Christian community, relational living, and the critique and cautions.



## NATURE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

William Stringfellow is a twentieth century Christian layman whose ministry has been largely spent in the heart of cities--he has seen the remains of once influential churches, remains left as monuments to religious communities which failed in their obedience to the Body of Christ. These monuments of stone and the once-was remind him of the fundamental incongruity of Christian communities gone religious. For Stringfellow, as for few others, the terms Christian and religious must always stand apart. The irreconcilable difference shines through the following citations.

"Religion," Stringfellow injects,

begins with the proposition that some god exists; Christianity, meanwhile is rejoicing in God's manifest presence among us. Religion describes men, searching for God, or more characteristically, searching for some substitute for God--that is, some idea of what God may be like . . . and then worshipping that idea and surrounding that substitution with dogma and discipline. But the Gospel tells when and how and why and where God has sought us and found us and offered to take us into His life.<sup>1</sup>

The static, the academic, the intellectual game-player owes neither allegiance nor obedience to the Gospel. The Gospel embraces the whole man; religion the mind, or possibly the emotions. Religion mimicks Gospel as it offers to satisfy the curiosity of men and replaces obedience with assent.

Elucidating the point further, he says:

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<sup>1</sup>William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury Press, 1964), p. 21.

Religion is the attempt to satisfy the curiosity of men in this world about God; Jesus Christ is the answer to the curiosity of men in this world about what it means to be truly a man . . . which God created.<sup>2</sup>

Viewing religion and Gospel as radically as he does, it is easy to understand why he asks a crucial question: "Has the church become so radically degenerate as a Christian community . . . and fearful of the Gospel . . . that it amounts to only another religious institution and cultus?"<sup>3</sup> He could ask no more damning question of the church, and the question is not without grounds. The church must recognize its sellout to religion, its adoption of cult, its attempts to legislate Gospel into obedience to its own institutionalism. Such practice meets its death in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is emphatic and lucid and--best of all--*true* is that this Gospel of Jesus Christ ends all religious speculation; demolishes all merely religious ceremonies and sacrifices appeasing unknown gods; destroys every exclusiveness which religion attaches to itself in God's name; attests that the presence of God is not remote, distant, and probably out of reach--but here, now and with us in this word, already.<sup>4</sup>

The church gives up the life that it has put on, as the surgeon removes a bandage upon a wound; neither will heal without exposure and perhaps pain. One has only to read a few pages into Stringfellow's *Free in Obedience* to know this difference exists in the churches. It is out of his own concern and obedience that he speaks; out of a mandate to break the religious bonds of the churches--or more correctly, to see the bonds broken by the Gospel.

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

Christ embodies the difference between religion and the Gospel. Christ bespeaks the care of God for everything to do with actual life, with life as it is lived by anybody and everybody, day in and day out.<sup>5</sup>

From the above passages two elements of his understanding of the nature of the Christian community emerge: (1) the church is not religious, (2) the church is not the showcase for God's presence. Said in a different way, this second emergent element declares that the " . . . church is just the place where men gather to declare that God takes the initiative in seeking men"<sup>6</sup> and that He seeks men on *their* frontiers of life and work. Thus any special relationship or "lifting up" of the church is negated.

Stringfellow doesn't expect resounding agreement from the churches or from society. This news that God is present in everyday life, that he is Being rather than some abstract concept, that the church be obedient by rejecting religious trappings of self-importance is not consistent with American ideas of religion. Thus he sets out to add to these concepts others that will *re-form* our concept of the church.

*The church is sacramental in character.*<sup>7</sup> The church, by the gift of God in Jesus of the Cross and Resurrection, is freed to give its life away. It is freed from the anxiety of self-preservation--which results in its ultimate death--and freed for service to the world without asking or expecting anything in return. By the free gift of the Christ the church is empowered to act vicariously (using Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

term). The church's sacramental gift to the world of men and of God is its very life. Quoting Stringfellow:

. . . the Christians (the church) must simply be in the world, sharing in and caring eloquently and honestly for the life of the ordinary world--or the life of any man--just as it is.<sup>8</sup>

*The church is silent*; it carries on no advertising campaign, nor tries to win popularity contests. For the most part the church's actions are to be secret, known only to those involved. The witness remains undisclosed and unlabeled except when the Christian people gather in community publicly to offer God their involvements jointly in praise, confession, and thanksgiving for His presence in the world.<sup>9</sup>

*The church, when obedient to God's word-about-man, displays His purpose for the human community* which encompasses all of mankind. "This," says Stringfellow, "is the only apparent image of the community reconciled with God in which the members are also reconciled to themselves, to each other, to all men, and to all creation."<sup>10</sup> Obedient, the church displays itself as revelation and reveals reconciled men-in-community. But the church is not the only vehicle at God's disposal and is expendable if disobedient; if the church refuses to respond, God Himself will take on the ministry He has given to the church.<sup>11</sup> Again a humbling thought for the church.

*The church is community.* As with Bonhoeffer, Stringfellow

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

believes that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian, a Christian out of community. Witness takes place only in relationship with the whole Body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> The Christian is called to his vocation through baptism (not ordination); his is a sacramental ministry.

The singular life of the Christian is a sacrament--a recall, a representation, an enactment, a communication of that given actual unity, whether in the gathering of the worshipping congregation now and then or whether in the scattering of members within the daily affairs of the world.<sup>13</sup>

The bond which holds the community together for the sacramental activity of Christians is, expectedly, the Gospel. "In Him all things are held together" (Col. 1:17). Jesus is God's Word that he cares extremely, decisively, inclusively, immediately for the ordinary, transient, proud, wonderful, profane, frivolous, heroic, lusty moments of man.<sup>14</sup>

Its ministry validated by its involvement at the frontiers of life, its affirmation of Christ's presence in the world, the church cannot *speak* of authentication or relevancy. Christ *is* the unity between God and the world, statements of relevancy are meaningless in the face of that reality.<sup>15</sup>

Measuring the church by Stringfellow's standards, it is relatively easy to recognize the grounds of his criticism of the institutional churches. The citation below is appropriate for making the transition to the empirical church.

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<sup>12</sup>William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

. . . Much of what is now discussed and practiced in American churches as the witness of the church does not really pertain to . . . the life and action of God in the world, but rather to the witness of the church to itself as churchly institution.<sup>16</sup>

#### RELATIONAL LIVING

Since Stringfellow's thought is grounded in his empirical understanding of the church, his concept of the nature of the church is one of *expectations*, rather than metaphysical or philosophical reality (which may be removed from reality). Even his choice of language exhibits a great degree of the actual involvement he sees necessary for the church. Thus, when he speaks of the bond which binds the empirical community of the church together, he speaks of the individual's encounter, his *relational living* with himself and with his fellow members of the Body of Christ.

One aspect of relational living in the community has already been touched, that of the necessity of community. The other aspect exists in the unity of being and manifestation, of being and doing. As Stringfellow relates it:

Who you are to one another and what you do with one another are, as it were, the same thing, inseparable and indistinguishable; one cannot be referred to without the other. There is, in love, a unity of being and doing.<sup>17</sup>

In psychological terms, the Christian in community is *wholeness*; he is so transformed by the gift of God of life in Christ that the

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<sup>16</sup>Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 115.

breaches of his selfhood are healed and his identity as self and Christian united. He is Christian person, Body of Christ. There is no longer any need to talk about particular Christian characteristics of the person, he *is*, and he is totally involved with being.

Acknowledging his wholeness, the Christian is called to radical obedience; radical " . . . in the sense that nothing which is achieved in secular life can ever satisfy the insight which the Christian is given as to what the true consummation of life in society is."<sup>18</sup> His is the recognition that his wholeness is from God and is not the "product" of any human experience; the church is thus unique in this respect.

This dimension of radicality calls the Christian into creative tension with the world at all points. His understanding is not the understanding of the world, but of Gospel; he constantly complains of the *status quo* and never accepts less than the full measure of obedience and freedom.<sup>19</sup> The church then is both *repentant* and *penitential* in its relationship to the world, its analogue is vicar. It is vicar in the sense that it lifts up the society for its blessing and healing; it is only too aware of the reality of sin in the social relationships of men. True vicarious repentance is its gift to the world; it realizes that acts of recrimination or restitution are but attempts to justify oneself--and justification comes only from God.<sup>20</sup>

The church's life-style is further influenced by its attention

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

to those on the extremities of society.<sup>21</sup> Love, or as Stringfellow terms it "ethics of witness," rules the social relationships of both church and world and individual Christian and world. These "ethics of witness" are guided by sacrament--by recognition and response to the gift of life--rather than through a sense of charity or law. They immerse the Christian in involvement, not indifference; in realism, rather than withdrawal; in knowledge, rather than ignorance.<sup>22</sup> They involve Christians in the areas of life where men are hurting, endangered, threatened by factors and powers which defeat the action of Christ in making them whole persons--by death.<sup>23</sup>

The Christian has a passport to freedom; he himself is so freed from his fear of death, in the spiritual and psychological sense but also in the clinical, that he can enter the areas of society where death resides. Stringfellow is eloquent when he says:

The Christian is so empirically free from the threat of death in his own life and in the existence of the rest of the world that he can afford to place that life at the disposal of the world or of anybody in the world without asking or expecting anything whatever in return.<sup>24</sup>

His passport allows him to indigenize ministry; to make it his own.

Crucially, for the Christian,

. . . there is no place which is more urgent to be than the place where he is, no work more significant than whatever is at hand, no person in greater need than the one immediately present, no issue more pressing than the one he now confronts.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>25</sup>Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith*, p. 9.



Any justification for delaying involvement to some suitable time or place is removed. The Christian's obedience is not to church but to God, and since God resides not in a special place of spiritual reserve (the church of some previous understanding) his life as a Christian depends on who he *is* as person.

What does this say of the person's practice of ministry, since we cannot generalize concepts which are dependent upon individual lives and contexts for action? Stringfellow replies:

The practice of the Christian life consists of the discernment of (the seeing and hearing), and the reliance upon (the reckless and uncalculating dependence), and the celebration (the ready and spontaneous enjoyment) of the presence of the Word (God) in the common life of the world.<sup>26</sup>

Further,

The experience of being a Christian is one of continually encountering in the ordinary and everyday events of life the same Word of God which is announced and heard, remembered and dramatized, expected and fulfilled in the sanctuary of the church.<sup>27</sup>

What then, are the implications for what we have usually called the ministry? First, there is *no forbidden work*--no corner of human existence is off limits, nor risk which cannot be undertaken. Secondly, there is an *intimacy toward the world* as it is; which may make the Christian look like a sucker or dullard.<sup>28</sup> Third, a Christian is not distinguished by particular political views or habitual conduct, or personal piety, or by his churchly activities; he is distinguished by his *radical esteem for the Incarnation* (God-in-human-form) and for his

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

reverence for the life of God in the whole of creation.<sup>29</sup> These apply equally to what we have called the professional ministry in this dissertation--which Stringfellow, out of his Episcopalian background chooses to call the priesthood.

There is an important place in Stringfellow's thought for professional ministry. The office of the priesthood actualizes the vicarious nature of the Christian in a form for the church; it parallels the Christian's role in relationship to the world. For the priest, however, the scene of activity is the Christian community, for that is the place where he self-consciously finds himself. To quote Stringfellow in this regard,

The office and ministry of the priesthood are located at the interstices of the Body of Christ and of the Congregation which represent that Body visibly and notoriously in the world. The ministry of the priesthood is a ministry to the members of the body in their relations to each other, relations consequent to their incredibly diversified ministry within the church.<sup>30</sup>

Thus the priesthood, and the priest, function vicariously, but the object of vicarious action is Christ, not the church. That is, the role of the priest acting *for* the community as agent is untenable; it is the people of God who act as vicar to the world, not their professional leadership. It is necessary to say here that the priest too acts as vicar to the world, but out of his membership in the Christian community, not out of his priesthood.

The priesthood, then, is directed to the most sophisticated life of the church, its community life, the church that is gathered as

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

a congregation for worship, and assembled for the exposition and exhibition of the word of God.<sup>31</sup> It is ministry addressed to the care and nurture of the members of the Body of Christ--a role not unlike that suggested in the model.

Specific roles of the priesthood are varied. They involve the ministry of confession, the awareness of failure in obedience in which the task and witness of each member is heard and *related* to that of all other members of the Body.<sup>32</sup> Also included is the priest's role as conserver and carer for the continuity and integrity of the Christian ministry--in this sense, the ministry of all baptised Christians.<sup>33</sup> And finally, there is his ministry which is devoted to the health, holiness, and wholeness of the Body of Christ in the world.<sup>34</sup> Each of these functions, owing to the complexity and sophistication of congregational life, push him to form enabling structures and relationships, revitalize traditional activity, and develop ways of involving laymen in the life of the church.

But the priesthood does not exhaust the roles required of the Christian community, it does in fact touch only the surface of the area of the church's concern. The ministry of the prophetic, the apologetic, and the evangelical are primarily *lay* ministries.

Stringfellow himself fills the role of the prophetic in the Christian community of which he finds himself a part. It is his

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

commitment to speaking the Word out of the vital context of his involvements in the city which allows him to play this role.

The role of Christian *apologist* is the layman's; he cannot call the priest for a spiritual first-aid kit, *he* must relate the Gospel to *his* life and work context. Pointedly put, Stringfellow adds:

. . . the laity cannot be saved from the apologetic task associated with their participation in the practical affairs of the world by the pronouncements of ecclesiastical authorities, nor by the ministry of the clergy. Each layman must be his own apologist, responsible for his stewardship of the Gospel in his daily life and work.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, evangelism is not the work of the professional, or clergy. Evangelism is another descriptive term for the life-style of the Christian, and thus is not a special activity of recruitment for the community. On this matter, he says:

Evangelism consists of loving another human being in a way which represents to him the care of God for his particular life. Evangelism rests upon the appeal to another man to remember his own creation--to remember Who made him and for Whom he was made. Evangelism is the event in which a Christian confronts another man in a way which assures the other man that the new life which he observes in the Christian is available to him.<sup>36</sup>

Key words of importance to the church and to the Christian examining his own obedience in light of Stringfellow's thought are: loving, representing, remembering, assuring, observing. They deal on a subjective level with a man's faith; subjective because he is related to persons.

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 60ff.

## CRITIQUE AND CAUTIONS

Stringfellow lifts up several areas where he feels that the church is attempted to distort the Gospel, and hence its life and ministry. These are important, in varying degrees of severity, as critiques and cautions for the model.

The first of the distortions is the *concealment of the gift from the world*. It grows from the church's inability to understand itself humbled and out of control of things. The church wants to be the church triumphant, the church of a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Stringfellow however, reminds us that Palm Sunday was not the triumph; the triumph was Easter morning--Christ's return from the dead.<sup>37</sup> The church manifests this distortion by attempting to legislate the Gospel, to equate obedience to God with obedience to churchly institutions, to adulterate the Word by exaggerating the importance of the church for salvation, and to make the witness of Christ contingent upon the church.<sup>38</sup> This amounts to a caution to the church that it not become religious. To become such involves usurping God.

In terms of the model, little overt evidence would indicate this to be a problem, but a possible variation or sophistication is possible. This sophistication is the exclusiveness of the sect-type church; the requirement that every member of the community experience

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<sup>37</sup>Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, pp. 31ff.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

some centralizing kind of phenomena. There was at times a dissatisfaction with those of the church community whose depth of commitment had not been tried by the deeper experiences of the Adventure Series or related group-life. Owing to the nature of the model and the persons involved, however, the awareness was present always of this danger. The community was remarkably able to provide a climate conducive to growth yet free from coercion.

Another distortion which Stringfellow isolates is that of *pluralism*.<sup>39</sup> By pluralism he means the watering down of ministry and commitment to the point where it ceases to have meaning. It is equivalent to "the priesthood of all believers," a concept which has meant in most Disciple churches "no priesthood at all."

The model, and the revised model which follows, uses the term *pluralistic ministry*. The use of that term is designed to give more, not less, body and importance to the various ministries. Rather than giving the layman the busywork function of the professional which utilizes minimal talent and maximal energy and time commitment, the model proposes to give an understanding of ministry building upon both the strengths and the opportunities of laymen. It also proposes a specific role for the professional which comes very close to Stringfellow's concept of "priesthood." Rather than water down ministry, it specifies ministerial roles in the Christian community.

This last phrase "in the Christian community" is probably

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105.

the determining one. For the role of ministry, that of priest and elder, described in the model, is a model for ministry addressed to the care and nurture of the members of the Body of Christ, the loving community. It does nothing to take away from the individual responsibility of ministry of the Christian received at baptism. It does in fact provide the nurture and the community of understanding and support which *enables* the Christian to take seriously the authority of their baptism, of the responsibility of their priesthood to the world of their everyday.

The model, moreover, allows the church's ministers--the priests to the community--actually to be at the points of contact and conflict within the community of faith. Such service to the community is impossible in any meaningful way in the preacher-congregation model most typically utilized in American protestant congregations. For the pastor only a limited number of possibilities for being at the interstices of the church member's lives exists--weddings, funerals, perhaps calling--he must therefore either be condemned to effective administration of programs, or be frustrated by his attempts to touch the lives of his people. Plurality of ministry does not help him to become related to all of his people on a primary level, but it does provide a structure, and more importantly persons, who do the work of nurturing and caring for the needs of God's people. This is a positive thrust of a pluralistic priesthood which is unmet in lesser forms of involvement.

The final caution is one which deals with the validity

of the whole experience of community at the Temple City congregation.

Is its motivation and unity based on Christ, or on something less?

The criticism is not one of straw, but of serious consequences.

Almost as if describing the congregation he says:

. . . often as not, the fact which unites such a . . . parish is not baptism into the Body of Christ and the company of the whole church throughout the ages, but a particular credo pertaining to moral behavior, dress, class, race, social custom, or sometimes just the *personality of a preacher* my emphasis or legends associated with the founder of a group. Churchly bodies such as these hardly commend themselves to the nation as models of the new society in Christ.<sup>40</sup>

One has to know the personality of Dennis Savage to know to what extent this was true. But experiences in the Spring of 1968 substantiate that at least a part of the criticism is justified when applied to the congregation.

Dr. Savage resigned in January of 1968 to become pastor of the First Christian Church of Whittier. His was a ministry of close relationships, and many were distraught at the thought of his leaving, feeling that the vitality of the church would soon decline. Regardless of what could be said from the pulpit, the church did feel a loss at his leaving. Well they should, for he was a member of the community, as well as a minister, and the community is always concerned with persons.

But the loving community which was created by Christ through the relationships of the persons remained alive. Its sense of community was weakened, not only by Dr. Savage's departure, but by the

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



untimely death of Harold Cooper, chairman of the elders, the stroke of one of the other elders, and the move of a final elder to Las Vegas. All of these incidents weakened the community, but none killed it. It survived and deepens in obedience and sense of loving community, because its roots and nurture surpassed reliance upon one of Christ's ministers.

The model has weaknesses and strengths; for this work with Stringfellow and Bonhoeffer to have meaning beyond mere theological exercise, applications of the criticisms to the concrete must be made.

## CHAPTER V

### REVISED CONGREGATIONAL MODEL

At the outset several questions were raised to provide focus for this study. One which has taken centrality is this: Dare we say today that the Christian doctrine of community has become the main focus of theological thought, and that this is of decisive relevance for the Christian approach to society? That question is answered in the affirmative for the model under study, while the judgment of that insight for the whole Christian community is left to the community for decision. Certainly, in terms of the model and revised model, a Christian doctrine of community has been a determinant of congregational life-style and pattern. The discussion now turns to a partial restatement of a theological position concerning Christian community, an understanding of the processes of community building, and a design for use by congregations in repatterning their congregational lives.

### A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The American protestant church currently looks at itself in very much the same way that it looks at Jesus. If what was seen was the vicarious responsibility of Bonhoeffer or the ethics of witness of Stringfellow, there would be little problem in designating the church (in the congregational sense) Christian community. But such is not the case in many congregations. The image is that of the

victim of society. Lost importance, lost prestige, lost control; these are the concerns of the victim church. An alternate distortion is the church triumphant identified by Stringfellow as the "scandal of Palm Sunday."

Church renewal rebuilds on neither of these distorted views of the nature of Christian community. It builds upon a concept of Christian community which is rooted in Christ and the Gospel.

Metaphorically and spiritually, *the church is the Body of Christ* (I Cor. 12:12; Romans 12:4-5). Christians related through baptism and faith to God-in-Christ, are integrally one. As a body, and the Body of Christ in the world specifically, Christians share the life of the Body; they are not mere members of a sociological institution, but are members of the community which is enlivened by the unique *gift* of Christ to the world. The church's motivation and power come from God and not through any power that individuals might possess.

Since the church is founded upon the uniqueness of the vicarious ministry of Jesus, it adopts as its life-style his. By its very root nature, then, the church is called to the world as a servant and as a vicar. Its symbol becomes Christ's symbol, the Cross. And its symbol means that the church stands at the intersection between intimate community and aloneness--both inherent in the cross, as it represents both death and joyous resurrection.

*The church is community*, and coheres because of the relationship to God and because God has charged the church to be his view of

man in community (Romans 14:7-8). The mode of community life mandated by the Gospel is interdependence at a depth level, and *Christian* man cannot isolate himself from the community.

Members of the church share the ministry of the church. Emulating the example of Jesus, they are agents for God, and vicars for the community of mankind. Another way of saying it is that the members of the Body of Christ are *pro-ponents* (those who carry the Word and the vicarious act of love) for God. Their being, their wholeness, for God involves them in a transference of loyalty and responsibility. *They are to men as Christ is to them*; the Gospel demands no less.

The present age of conflict and community-chaos has once again brought us face to face with the two facts which make our--the Christian community's--existence meaningful: we can know God as he has revealed himself in Christ and we can respond to men precisely because of the way that he has revealed himself. The suburban church, following the example of Christ can adopt a *missionary theology*; a theology that is written by the actual needs of men. The church is thus freed from being a religious institution (in Bonhoeffer's language); Christians are free to leave their island syndromes and their ghettoized existence as religious men in cities, suburbs and churches to become vicars for Christ.

The Christian learns to live a rootless life, rootless in the sense that the world would understand. By the example of Christ he must learn to be centered on God so that he is independent of

structures, dependent ultimately only on his relationship with God.

The church's message--its authentication is its very life--is a declaration of the *interdependence* of men. It is the message of ultimate freedom and responsible obedience.

To define the church as the Christian community is to place more emphasis upon its communal nature than on its institutional nature. Before all else the church is the community of Christians gathered together in love and obedience to God. Hence ministry is defined in terms of the whole community and has a dual focus: witness to the world of men and the work of the church as community.

Its witness in the world calls it to be really present; it does not play-act, it is present where and when men of need are. It provides an *effective* presence in the community of men, a presence in which human suffering is shared, and human values are embraced and transformed. The church's ministry is not ill-informed charity; it is Gospel-informed reality and sensitivity to those human concerns which exist--cultural, moral, psychic, socioeconomic, and political. It embraces:

- problems of meaning, unbelief, alienation, despair
- problems of hunger, poverty, and ignorance
- problems of urbanization and rural development
- problems of self-development of minority peoples
- problems of increasing leisure
- problems of education, social communication<sup>1</sup>

Real problems.

But there is also another side. There is the community's self-

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<sup>1</sup>William J. Richardson, *The Church as Sign* (Maryknoll: Maryknoll Press, 1968), p. 139.

ministry. This model fits into that category, but it has no meaning if the ministry of the people of God is neglected. It is the *ministry of relationships*. It is the ministry which enables and equips for ministry. It is the ministry which, with the power of God's love as a foundation, bridges the gaps of personhood and provides a human climate for the acceptance of God's gift of wholeness and affirmation. It is this ministry, this quest for structures supportive of the three-pronged relationship of men (person to God, person to self, and person to person) which is the focus of this whole study. One such structure has been suggested and its limitations noted; its strengths remain, however, and provide a foundation for a revised model.

#### PROCESSES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

The structure examined is a community-building process which is entirely appropriate to the theologies of both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and William Stringfellow, though the investigator takes ultimate responsibility for the particular application and critique. No conscious attempt was made to make either the model fit the theologies, nor the reverse. It is fairly obvious from the treatment that the model and the presentation of the theologies share an understanding of the nature of the church. There are many community building processes and this one is appropriate to the residential parish ministry.

The specific contributions which the theology of Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow make to the evaluation of this model for community-

building have been noted as both critique and caution. Perhaps the level where both theologians contribute most critically is at the level of the basic understanding of church.

The Temple City model attempts to lift the communal nature of the church above its institutional nature. The well-focused criticism of the two theologians is that the spiritual nature be lifted above the communal nature. The development process described in the model attempts to create a human counterpart of the communion of saints (Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*) and must always be called back to its imperfection. Thus, while it has been repeatedly recalled, the basic problem of this, or any, model, is its grounding in the spiritual dimension.

With all of the sophisticated attempts to make the church a *Christian community*, we are brought again to the factor of *grace*--gift. The tension is always present between the *is* and the *becoming*; we may revitalize our human relationships, we may make relevant our particular mode of activity as Christians, but our *aliveness*, our very *existence* as the Christian community is not *our* creation. This is but a paraphrase of Bonhoeffer's statement that the church is basically a spiritual body rather than a sociological institution.

The techniques and structures of the Temple City model *without* the spiritual dimension build a sociological institution which *may* be qualitatively better than many parish models being discarded. The model devoid of the spiritual dimension is capable of creating a self-sustaining community machine which "produces" little more than warm

glows of friendship and fellowship so often the trade-marks of early twentieth century churches. But *with* the dimension of obedience to the Gospel view of man in community and the essential life of vicariousness, *the model has the potential for developing a Christian community which is the demonstration to the world of God's intention for man.*

There is no apparent way that this model can communicate that essential understanding of the nature of the church, for as a structure it functions only as an enabling support for *persons* engaged in building community. At best it can provide a context for relationships and a framework for response to God's revelation in Christ. The theologies of Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow contribute materially to the theological support and understanding of the working of God with man in community. They are a constant recalling of the community to *integrity of purpose*; they are a reminder to the community that much of practical church life has nothing to do with Gospel or vicarious living-for-others.

But the model adds strength to the theological understanding of the church by claiming a *specificity of ministry* for Christians engaged in the ministry to the witnessing community. It does not overlook the witnessing aspect of obedience, but consciously limits itself in this treatment to the inferior life of the community. This model, then, does not see the service of the witnessing congregation as a distortion of the Gospel, but as a part of a loyalty to the Gospel; it builds upon a view of professional ministry shared with



Stringfellow and relegates much of the specificity of that pastoral ministry with a broader base of committed and sensitive Christians.

#### A DESIGN

The model then is a sketch, a design fashioned intentionally by a residential parish to revitalize its community life and to bring it into closer obedience to God's word-about-man-in-Christ. The revisions necessary are two: commitment to a theological understanding of Christian community, and a further relegation of specificity of ministry to the deacons.

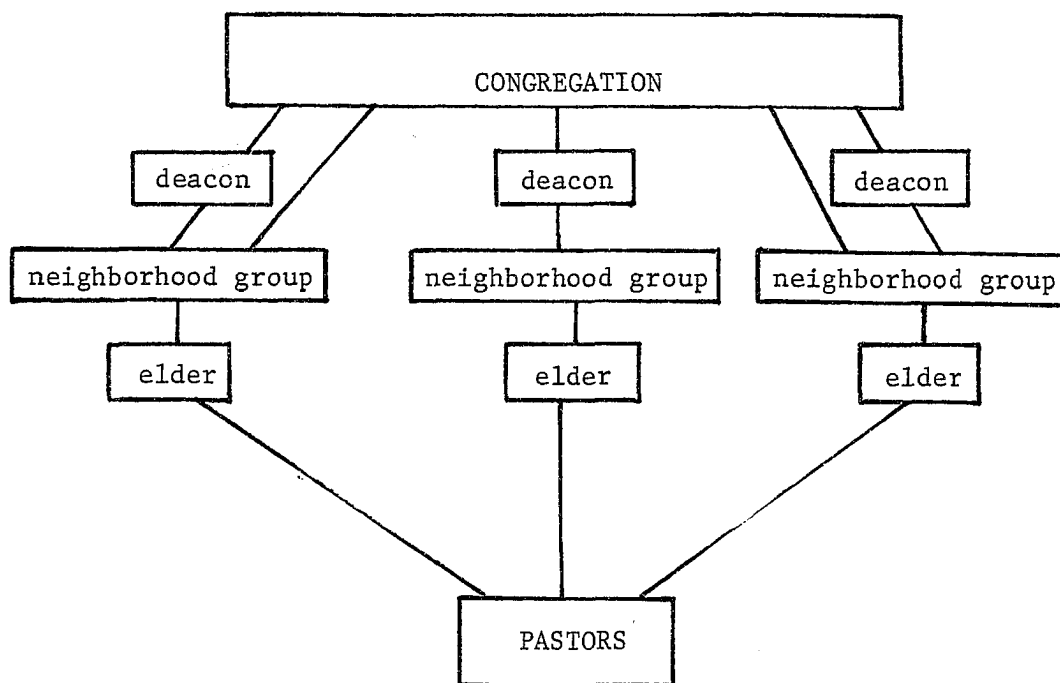
The initial revision is by way of preparation for the employment of the model by another congregation. Imposition of this model without providing a proper Christian perspective would contribute only to the creation of a sociological institution. The communication of a theological understanding of *Christian* community must precede any renewal structure; this communication must be achieved with at least the core leadership (perhaps the elders) and may be accomplished by employment of the Adventure Series or by small group experiences indigenously generated.

The structural revision is achieved by extending the plurality a step further to the deacons, traditionally the servants of the churches, though only nominally employed as ushers and caretakers. The point at which they are the most valuable as leadership for the churches is the area of witness and mission. The deacons, sensitized and "educated" through basically the same process as the elders, should

be trained and employed as innovators of witness and mission. Their sensitivity could be developed as an awareness of the community's needs, and they could in turn work with the neighborhood groups in translating obedience into vicarious action. This would defeat a short-circuiting of energies which might leave the community a community of fellowship and friendship without the dimension of obedience. Schematically we would have something like this:

FIGURE 4

## REVISED COMMUNITY CARE-WITNESS DESIGN



The community, the Body of Christ, exercises the witness of the vicarious ministry on the frontiers of life where it experiences it. The members of the community are enabled to minister by the *network of supportive relationships* which flow out of experiences with God and man; structurally the neighborhood groups provide small group settings for the confessional aspect of the church's life--confessing weakness of the individual Christian and the community without obedience to Christ. In that setting Christians are both ministered to (elders) and helped to minister (deacons). The pastors, in addition to their roles as professionally trained persons caring for the needs of the congregation, recapture the role of the teaching elder to enable the plural lay ministry to the church--elders and deacons--to minister to the community.

This ministry is derivative of Christ's ministry--it is built upon the idea of vicarious action, and it provides for the support of the ministry where Christians are. It places the professional minister in a special role--functioning *for* and *with* the church community. He is not in any sense the social action or witness representative of the congregation; his thrust of ministry, like that of every other Christian is his gift of his life to the world in the name of Christ.

The other features of a design for congregational application are those basic to the original model developed by and for the Temple City Christian Church. They consist of a revised role for the employment of lay ministers (elders), an educational plan providing for the

growth of Christian community, and a concept of supportive ministry based upon neighborhood proximity.

The breakdown of the suburban congregation into "neighborhood groups" allows a beneficial ministry of meaning to take place where the community is. It allows significant contact with the persons who share the awareness that they are the Body of Christ. The use of the Adventure Series is extremely beneficial in both acquainting Christians with the responsibilities of obedience and of developing an authentic sensitivity to the pains and concerns of men.

A church thus organized provides a context of relationships which is both interpretive and supportive of the community's witness. As the educational process continues, a field of relationships develops which seriously changes the complexion of the congregation. *Community, specifically Christian community, is an effective change agent.*

Concluding, it must be remembered again that the community receives its mandate for obedience from God. The central act of the community as Christian community must be the exposition and interpretation of the Word. The church gathered for worship must rehearse and celebrate the claims of the Gospel upon the lives of Christians. It must keep itself humbled lest it be tempted to become once again some exclusive brand of sociological institution far removed from the depths of authentic Christian community; it must always remain the repentent and penitential community of faith, for the temptations of men will soon distort anything less.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY

Today men in the suburbs are being driven toward interdependence by a melange of factors: technology, increased leisure, socioeconomic chaos, loneliness. The Gospel of Christ calls the Christian community to itself on the same basis: interdependence. The church's faith in the Gospel as God's new word about man frees Christians from the fears and oppressions of secular society and enables Christians to become radically involved in a vicarious ministry where they live and work.

The church's ministry is twofold; its witness to the world of the new possibility for man, and its ministry to the Christian community of love. *The* ministry is the ministry of the Body of Christ; the professional ministry, the priesthood, provides for the care and nurture of Christians and acts as the vicarious minister of Christ to the community itself, which is ever in need of confessing and recalling its responsibilities in obedience to the Gospel.

While the presses continue to roll with new tomes about the lay ministry, the layman is usually the person conceived as the uninstructed person rather than as one competent to do God's work. The model builds upon the strength and sensitivity of Christians mature in their understanding of both the content of the revelation about man in community and its demands. It takes seriously the equipping of the persons who naturally find themselves at the intersections of relationships, and it promotes an active role in the building of a

network of relationships supportive of ministry and the growth of persons. It sees these persons, functioning as a plurality of ministers to the community, as essential components of a Christian loving community.

Taking both the heritage of the Disciples, and the needs of persons for community seriously, the framework for relationed living uses the traditional role of elder for revitalized community life.

The model proposed is neither a final nor a general answer to the community needs of suburban churches. God works in many different ways; no one pattern of ministry is viable in every situation. This structure provided a meaningful and Christian context for ministry; it continues to do so. It has strengths which recommend it, among them loyalty to God's revelation about men in community given as gift in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, however, there must be a time-bomb which destroys any illusions of perfection in any single form of the church.

William Stringfellow supplies it in this citation from *A Private and Public Faith*:

There does not exist in the mind of God, nor need there in the imagination of men, some ideal, platonic church to which the churchly institutions should aspire; therefore, no recent or present institutional innovation should be regarded as appropriate for other than the actual historic situation that has prompted it.<sup>1</sup>

Only as this structure of community is related to its image of love (Christ) can it be protected from abuse and distortion.

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<sup>1</sup>William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 9.

Community alone can become a closed, introverted circle; witness can be a monologue to the world to which the community will not listen; and the gathering around the Word for worship can become a new island of privatism and protectionism which insulates the church from the world that it sees as threat rather than gift. Ministry then becomes self-service in the most distorted, selfish sense; with witness making claims upon the human community and transforming itself into a religious institution.

Recalling Gospel as both beginning and end, this study concludes:

The truth is that we neither live nor die as self-contained units. At every turn, life links us to God.

--Romans 14:7-8.

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